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ABSTRACT

Although the concept of coherence is elusive, explorations of the historical, theoretical, and empirical discussions of coherence can illuminate, though not eliminate, the concept's elusiveness. There are three inter-related and overlapping ways that readers make coherence. Intratextuality, the notion that readers perceive a text as coherent if it is unified with a single recognizable subject (or closely related subjects), is derived from script-based semantics--the contextual semantic theory of Victor Raskin. A second way of making coherence, extratextuality, occurs when a text refers to or is centered around an identifiable cultural, philosophical, cognitive, social, historical, or political assumption, and readers of the text who are familiar with that assumption are able to perceive the text's coherence in ways that unfamiliar readers may not. Finally, intertextuality--relations between one representation and another rather than between a textual imitation and a nontextual one--has several coherence-contributing aspects, including: (1) the text is a recognizable genre; (2) the text is thematically like other texts; (3) the text makes the reader think of other texts; and (4) the text derives from, implies familiarity with, or parodies other texts. These intertextual links, like the intratextual and extratextual links, assume the reader's participation in creating coherence. (Thirteen references are appended.) (MM)

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(Inter)textuality, Semantics, and Coherence

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Coherence is one of the slipperiest concepts those of us interested in the creation and interpretation of written discourse read and think and teach about. That the concept itself should be so slippery is, in a sense, ironic, since the word coherence literally means the act of sticking together. Yet, as we examine the historical, theoretical, and empirical discussions of the concept, we discover its elusiveness--an elusiveness which will not have been eliminated by the end of this exploration, but which I hope to illuminate.

Historically, the word "coherence" first seems to have "officially" entered discussions of writing in the nineteenth century when Bain used the terms *unity, coherence,* and *emphasis* to identify the qualities of effective paragraphs. According to the O.E.D., the word had been applied to spoken and written discourse as much as two centuries earlier, but it is Bain's *English Composition and Rhetoric* (1866) which turned coherence into a pedagogical and evaluative concept. What specifically has been meant by coherence is a different question, however. In composition texts since Bain, it has been referred to as a quality of paragraphs which helps establish unity. A century after Bain, modern rhetoricians attempted to identify some of the features of paragraphs which make them coherent, focusing primarily on structural patterns such as coordination and

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subordination (Christensen, 1965), functional patterns (Becker, 1965; Young and Becker, 1965; Larson, 1967), and intersentential links (Winterowd's 1970 "The Grammar of Coherence" is typical). This work shares two features. First, it treats coherence as something found in texts, identifiable as grammatical, lexical, or semantic features. Second, although all of these researchers limit their work to the paragraph, all suggest that what they propose about coherence in paragraphs holds true for longer texts and whole discourses.

Within the last decade, both of the shared features of the previously cited work have gained the attention of other composition theorists and researchers. Basing their work on concepts borrowed from text linguistics and pragmatics, Witte and Faigley (1981), Bamberg (1983), and Phelps (1985) have begun to explore coherence in whole discourses. In doing so, they have recognized the limitations of viewing coherence as an exclusively structural or linguistic phenomenon.

A problem with these exclusively linguistic concepts of coherence is that they do not operate consistently. That is, while it is true that the use of cohesive ties such as those discussed by Winterowd and more thoroughly by Halliday and Hasan in *Cohesion in English* (1976), or of topical structures variously referred to as **old/new, topic/comment, given/new, theme/rheme** do contribute to a text's sticking together, it is both possible and easy to find or write discourses which are coherent but which also violate the principles--and to find discourses which follow the principles but which are nevertheless not coherent.

You will have noticed, I am sure, that I have just asserted texts do exist which are coherent and others exist which are not. You will also have noticed that I make this claim without having defined what I mean by coherent or its opposite. My doing so points to another weakness of exclusively linguistic explanations of the term: they ignore the reader. I am able to assert that coherent and incoherent texts exist because, as a reader, I am able to interpret texts and to recognize when they stick together and when they do not. The contemporary research and scholarship cited above recognizes the importance of the reader's role in determining coherence. Fahnestock calls coherence ". . . the quality enabling a reader to sense a 'flow" of meaning . . ." (1983, 400). Witte and Faigley (1981), Phelps (1985), and Bamberg (1983) point out that coherence is both textual and extra-textual: it depends on textual clues and on, as Bamberg explains, the ability of readers "to draw on their own knowledge and expectations to bridge gaps and to fill in assumed information" (420). Such a view of coherence echoes Iser's notion of the "gestalt" of a literary text, a wholeness which he attributes in part to a reader's ability to fill in "gaps" or "blanks." Iser explains that "by impeding textual coherence, the blanks transform themselves into stimuli for acts of ideation" (*The Act of Reading*, 194). That is, the blanks or gaps which are signals of incoherence are also the stimuli for the creation of coherence by the reader.

It is the reader's role in creating coherence which I wish to explore now, by examining three inter-related and overlapping ways that readers make coherence, each of which both limits and delimits interpretation.

The first way of making coherence I will call **intratextual** (though it might also be called **textual** or **contextual**). Here I wish to discuss not the grammatical or structural contributions to coherence (which are primarily cohesion-producing), but the semantic, specifically the contextual semantic theory of Victor Raskin, which he calls script-based semantics. What Raskin calls the script for a word includes not only typical dictionary information about a word's meaning but also contextual information which far surpasses what we typically think of as connotation. Thus the script for a word like "Doctor" accounts for information such as "adult," "human," "study medicine," "receive patients," "diagnose and cure disease," "doctor's office," "hospital," "physical contact," and so on. This is information which readers who know the word can infer from it. Texts in which the scripts are consistent and unambiguous are more likely to be coherent than texts in which the scripts are not, and such consistency and unambiguity are the products of the context. Raskin uses the sentence "The bachelor hit the colorful ball" as an illustration. Context would allow us to determine which of three possible scripts for "bachelor" was appropriate: a young knight, any unmarried man, or a young virgin male fur seal. Similarly, we would be able to distinguish among various scripts for "hit"--the most obvious being "strike," but another plausible one being the casual "to attend," or "drop by," and for "ball"--"a spherical object" or "a formal social dance." Thus context provides some limits to a reader's interpretations of scripts since ordinarily, in non-literary language, readers expect that one "super-script" (what others have called "hypertheme," "frame," or "schema") will dominate the text, and they

create coherence by selecting those scripts which are consistent with one another and thus create a "super-script" or "meaning" for the discourse. But while script-theory explains how semantic information limits interpretive possibilities, it also suggests the multiple interpretations available to readers, for any decision to privilege one script in a given context is always a decision to put aside, for the time, all other possible scripts.

Intratextuality is perhaps closest to the traditional notion of coherence Bain refers to. Readers perceive that a text is coherent if it is unified; that is, if it seems to be about a single recognizable subject (or more than one closely-related subjects). If after you have finished reading it, you are able to say that this paper is about coherence, you have a perception of its coherence. (This would also be true if you were to say that this paper is about reader's responses to texts, or about theories of coherence, or about linguistics and coherence--but probably not if you were to say that this text is about baseball. In other words, I am not asserting that coherence is limited to what *I* as writer intend this paper to be about, though it is probably partially limited by what can be inferred from the language I have used--or related language which I have not used, but which you provide.) Thus, if a reader is unable to say "This discourse is about X," it is not necessarily an indication that the discourse is not coherent, but only an indication that for that particular reader, what the text is about is unclear, perhaps because that reader does not possess the necessary knowledge to recognize the topic.

This leads me to a second way of making coherence, the **extratextual.** By this I mean a number of things, which are sometimes also called **contextual:** cultural, philosophical, cognitive, social, historical, and political, to name a few. When a text refers to or is centered around an identifiable cultural, philosophical, cognitive, social--etc. assumption or set of assumptions, readers who are familiar with that assumption are able to perceive the text's coherence in ways that unfamiliar readers may not. The inability to say that a given text "is about X" may thus be attributed to differences both in the knowledge writers and readers share about the "facts" which the discourse is about and in their shared extratextual knowledge. For example, students from Asia or the Middle East may produce texts in response to writing assignments which American writing instructors may perceive as incoherent--as not sticking together--if we are unaware of the conventions of politeness or argument which are part of their culture and which govern their way of constructing discourses. Of course, it is possible for readers unfamiliar with the specific details of culture, etc. to understand discourse produced at other times and in other places--we can understand Aristotle and Shakespeare, can perceive their coherence, though it is likely that we perceive coherence in ways which their contemporaries did not. All readers read with all of their prior knowledge, with their cultural clothes, and therefore create coherence according to what they bring with them as well as what they find in the text. Thus not only can readers perceive coherence in texts from distant times and places in the past, they can accept the assumptions provided them in imaginary works, including works of science fiction

which ignore familiar extratextual assumptions and create their own.

A third way readers make coherence is **intertextual**, by which I mean what Culler has referred to as relations "between one representation and another rather than between a textual imitation and a nontextual one" (On Deconstruction, 187). Among the coherence-contributing aspects of intertextuality are:

1. the text is a recognizable genre and accords to the conventions of that genre;

2. the text is like, thematically, other texts;

3. the text refers to, is derived from, implies familiarity with, parodies (or is perceived by the reader to refer to, be derived from, imply familiarity with, or parody) other texts;

4. the text makes the reader "think of" other texts and ideas he or she can attribute to other texts.

These intertextual links, like the intratextual and extratextual links identified earlier, assume the reader's participation in creating coherence. In part coherence is created when readers recognize that a particular discourse fits the conventions of a genre: a poem, a fairy tale, a lab report, a personal essay for an English composition class. If a reader perceives that a discourse is a member of a particular genre through its format, its structure, its context, or its announced intentions, he or she will make the effort to read the discourse as a coherent example of that genre. And according to the expectations the genre creates, the reader will accept more or

less deviation from the conventions which typically govern it. We (typically) accept more variety, more surprise, in poems than we do in lab reports--or freshmen essays. Thus a discourse which may be judged incoherent if it is identified as belonging to one genre might be seen as coherent if it is identified as belonging to another in which the conventions are less restrictive. Indeed, readers will work hard to discover coherence in some types of discourse--or will accept what in other instances might be deemed incoherence--if the underlying conventions of the genre dictate that readers sort through multiple possible interpretations, even accepting the multiple interpretations as part of what creates the coherence.

A looser aspect of intertextuality is that a text is thematically like other texts. We read a text and acknowledge that it "is about" the same topic as others we are familiar with. It is this expectation which allows us to read an edited collection of essays and make connections among them--though it is often the task of the editor to, through selection and through an introduction and/or afterword, instruct us in how to recognize the coherence of the work as a whole. (We can see in some collections more than others the artifice or convention of coherence at work.) Similarly, we read and juxtapose a series of articles about, for example, social constructions of knowledge, understanding each successive article as "about" the same topic as the others, and are able to perceive the coherence of each in part because we have an understanding of what such discourses are about.

In some cases, direct intertextual references enable readers to

perceive coherence. One of the conventions of academic discourse is to cite others whose work influences our own. Such citations ground discourse in a more specific way than do the thematic echoes referred to above. Citations typically allow readers to recognize how a particular text differs from or is related to specific others. Other deliberate kinds of intertextual reference include satire and parody which count on the reader being able to identify what is being parodied or satirized. And readers of some modern novelists, like John Barth and John Updike, recognize specific intertextual connections, some quite clear like Updike's three Rabbit books and some more subtle, like Barth's recurring scenes, situations, references, and characters.

Finally, intertextuality operates when readers make connections with other texts though the connections are not obviously thematic or apparent. As we read, our efforts to create coherence are influenced by all that we know, all that we have read and incorporated into our thinking. Though the author of the text we read may not have intended them, and the text itself may not directly suggest them, we hear the echoes of other texts which help us recognize the coherence of the text before us. While I read, deliberately, the works of those scholars I have cited, I found myself understanding their discourse in part through my understanding of other discourses--including literary works, student papers, Genesis, other scholarship, and so on. Their work was coherent for me in part because of the resonance of other texts--their traces which both distinguish and unite meanings.

I said in beginning that I did not intend to eliminate the

elusiveness of the concept we name coherence. My discussion so far has been intended to suggest some of the uses of the term and some of the ways readers construct coherence. To close, I wish to speculate on, first, why the term remains elusive, and second, why the elusiveness of the term suggests a resistance to making discourses and what they mean stick together.

To understand the elusiveness of coherence, we might try to address it in terms of its opposite: incoherence. The difficulty here is that "incoherence" is derived morphologically from "coherence." The prefix "in"--"not"--tells us only that the other side of "coherence" is "not coherence." We can apparently only understand incoherence if we know what coherence is. Experience, I would argue, tells us differently. We recognize some texts as incoherent, even if we are unable to explain how or why we recognize their incoherence. Might there be other "opposites" for coherence? Culler opposes "intelligible" with "incoherent," ("Literary Competence," cited in Tompkins, 110), suggesting both that coherent texts are intelligible and that incoherent texts are not. Here, too, experience argues otherwise. We can, and do as writing teachers, identify some students' texts as incoherent, yet we can understand them--they are intelligible. A more attractive opposite term for coherence might be chaos, for if coherence suggests a wholeness, a sticking together, chaos suggests disorder, confusion, and formlessness. In a number of traditional ways, chaos is seen to be undesirable--something prior to and not as good as what follows it. The hand that shapes order out of chaos is good--the hand of the author of the universe, of the poem, of the paper.

And yet there is something attractive about chaos and threatening about coherence. The coherent text is one which leads its reader to a particular interpretation, creating a context which shapes and reshapes and limits by forcing the reader to push aside other possible interpretations, closing off or at least attempting to limit what a reader understands the text to be about. The coherent text is the **product** of a writer's play with incoherence (it is no accident that many of our heuristics and pre-writing strategies promote a prior incoherence out of which a coherent text is to be shaped), and its product-quality asserts that it possesses meaning which the reader can "get." We know that for writers unstructured play with language can be liberating, can forestall or diminish their anxiety, their fear of closure. It may well be that the closure which "coherence" suggests for writers and readers as well may help us understand our inability--if not our unwillingness--to define it.

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